

# A 'Systemic Theories of Change' Approach for Purposeful Capacity Development

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**Abstract** In this article, we present an emergent capacity development approach that we are developing through participatory action research in Peru and Ecuador, which we call 'systemic theories of change' (STOC), for organisational capacity development. We argue that capacity development should be understood as systemic learning. The STOC approach promotes reflection about how we as individuals, organisations, and broader social groups and societal configurations, understand how change occurs. This makes it possible to build improved strategic and methodological clarity about how we might continually develop the capacities to contribute more effectively to emergent, social change in highly complex environments.

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## 1 Introduction

As practitioners working in capacity development, we have become increasingly aware that organisations, and we as capacity building facilitators, often make 'blind prescriptions based on *assumed conditions for change*' (Reeler 2007: 2, italics added). As a result, organisations and facilitators are not able to align the ways they think about and practice capacity development with the complexities of real life and human change. Therefore, we are currently developing and applying an action research approach, that we are calling 'Systemic Theories of Change (STOC)', with two social change organisations (SCOs) in Lima, Peru and one in Quito, Ecuador. The purpose of the STOC approach is to support SCOs and change facilitators that are seeking improved strategic and methodological clarity on how they might continually and effectively develop the capacities to contribute to emergent, social change in highly complex environments.

This article presents the STOC approach by first arguing that we should understand capacity development as systemic learning. It then explains how the STOC approach was inspired by a traditional Theory of Change approach, before outlining how its methodological

principles flow from a very different worldview than Theory of Change. It then provides an example of how the STOC approach is being applied with a SCO in Peru.

## 2 The importance of approaching capacity development as systemic learning

Morgan (2006: 7) states that capacity as state or condition is inherently a systems phenomenon, in that it dynamically emerges from a complex combination of tangible and intangible attitudes, resources, strategies and skills in a particular context. There is a body of literature that argues that systems thinking, with its focus on relationships, is a useful way of approaching organisational capacity development (see Baser and Morgan 2008; Morgan 2005, 2006), and development in general (Pasteur 2006). Systems thinking posits that 'phenomena are understood to be an emergent property of an interrelated whole... [which] cannot be fully comprehended in terms only of properties of constituent parts... [and where] valid knowledge and meaningful understanding comes from building up whole pictures of phenomenon, not by breaking them into parts' (Flood 2001: 133). These holistic 'emergent' properties 'are destroyed when the system is dissected, either physically or theoretically, into isolated elements' (Capra

1996: 29). Capra explains that the Greek meaning of the word system or *synhistanai* is ‘to place together’, and he states that ‘to understand things systemically literally means to put them into a context, *to establish the nature of their relationships*’ (Capra 1996: 29, italics added).

The basic tension is one between the parts and the whole. The emphasis on the parts has been called mechanistic, reductionist, or atomistic; the emphasis on the whole holistic, organismic, or ecological. In twentieth-century science the holistic perspective has become known as ‘systemic’ and the way of thinking it implies as ‘systems thinking’. (Capra 1996: 17)

Systems exist in broader ‘environments’ or contexts in which they affect and are affected by the behaviour of multiple actors and relationships (Ison 2008: 140). Systems are layered in networked macro-level and sub-systems (Checkland 1993: 75). Between layers, communication facilitates information flow and coordination, which permits functioning as a coherent, identifiable whole ‘which can adapt and survive in a changing environment’ (Checkland 1993: 313; Checkland 2000: S29). Due to their inherently networked and layered configurations, systems need to be studied in relation to their environment if their emergent properties are to be understood.

‘Soft systems’ thinking in particular helps to introduce the idea of systems and processes that are meant to be flexible, emergent, iterative and learning-based, in order to offer more relevant responses to complex social change. They are not assumed to be ‘real’ objective systems that can be engineered; but rather, learning devices that can be used to think systemically about and take purposeful, emergent action in complex realities. We consider that these learning approaches – embedded in action research – can help SCOs critically reflect upon their work, question core assumptions, and strengthen their ability to do their work in more purposeful ways.

The world is taken to be very complex, problematical, mysterious. However, our coping with it, the process of inquiry into it, it is assumed, can itself be organised as a learning system. (Checkland 2000: S17)

Following Checkland (2000), the STOC approach assumes that we can approach capacity

development as a ‘learning system’ that helps SCOs make better sense of the complexity that they work within. Systemic learning approaches are based on a questioning of assumptions and taken-as-given rules and procedures (i.e. double loop learning) (Argyris 2003: 1179; Britton 2005: 41), as well as in rethinking the fundamental purposes and principles, not only to alter the framework within which we make choices, but also to alter the underlying premises and belief systems that form these frameworks (i.e. triple loop learning) (Hawkins 1991: 177).

In addition to soft systemic principles, ‘critical’ systemic thinking can be helpful in order to critically address the boundaries that organisations draw for their capacity development and related systems (Midgley, Munlo and Brown 1998; Reynolds 2006; Ulrich 1994). In addition, it can critically and systemically analyse issues of power and culture in order to ‘challenge the hierarchical nature of organisations, the ultimate decision making rights of powerful stakeholders, or the unequal distribution of organisational resources to different stakeholders...’ (Jackson 2000: 269).

This relational analysis of systemic thinking can help make the inherent complexity of social change more evident and help to rethink and reveal more synergistic relationships between an organisation and the actors in its environment. It can also help to better understand how purposeful organisational change shapes and is shaped by an SCO’s interaction with the ‘actors and factors’ in its environment. In the process, it aims to help establish a more meaningful relationship between the way an organisation conceives of and approaches its capacity development and the social change it exists to support.

### **3 Systemic theories of change for purposeful capacity development of social change organisations**

#### **3.1 Relationship to theory of change methodology**

Ortiz Aragón (this *IDS Bulletin*) argues that, even if not made explicit, capacity development practice is informed by deep, culturally-embedded worldviews and theories of change that strongly condition the way individuals and organisations approach capacity development. As such, he argues that purposeful, non-linear capacity development could be, in part, enabled by making these theories of change explicit. This

broad concept of theories of change bears little resemblance to the planning methodology 'theory of change'. However, it was our experience with that methodology on different facilitation teams that initially influenced and intrigued us to explore its use further in the field of organisational capacity development of SCOs.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional TOC methodology, as we used it, is essentially a visual strategic planning process.<sup>2</sup> It identifies a long-term vision of success; the multiple levels of preconditions to that vision of success and the interventions that would *produce* those conditions. In this way, it explores underlying assumptions about the relationships between desired outcomes and the way proposed interventions are expected to *bring them about*. These elements, assembled into a visual diagram or 'outcome map', together with a list of assumptions about change, become a theory of change (Reisman and Gienapp 2004; Mackinnon and Amott 2006; ActKnowledge 2009).

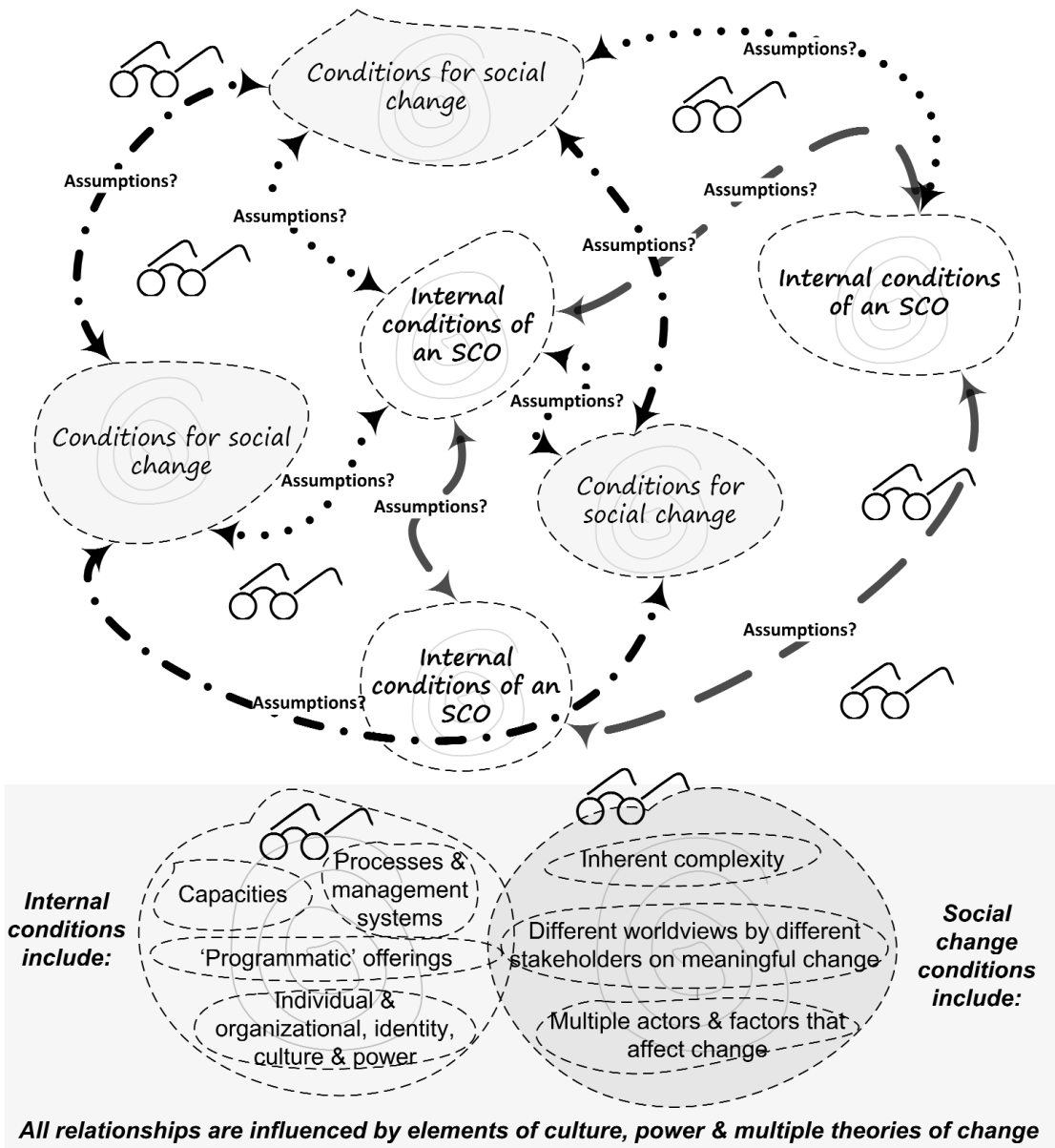
With regard to the STOC approach, what we have taken from our previous TOC experiences is the value of creating visual aids for mapping change; the value of thinking of change conditions somewhat independently of what a particular organisation might like to do; and the importance of discussing assumptions on how people think change occurs and the implications of those assumptions. The visual nature of TOC introduces some systemic thinking by helping to envisage relationships between change conditions. Given that any particular organisation's contribution to change is inherently limited, an analysis of change conditions – via asking what a situation calls for before asking what an organisation might do about it – might help better orient what an organisation offers to support that change and reduce self-referential programmatic offerings. The most important thing we take from our TOC experiences however, is simply the value of putting change assumptions and worldviews on the table for discussion, which can potentially enrich an organisation's understanding of change and its contributions to change.

What we leave behind is the heroic language and linear cause and effect thinking found in the TOC sources we have used in the past (italics added in all citations below). For example, Anderson (2004: 13) notes that a 'TOC approach

focuses first on identifying all of the *necessary and sufficient* preconditions for reaching a long-term goal. Only after these conditions have been identified and laid out in a change pathway can the appropriate actions be developed to *bring them about*'. Keystone (2006: 12) and ActKnowledge (2009) also refer to *necessary and sufficient* conditions; Mackinnon and Amott (2006: 3) refer to activities 'that will *produce* those conditions'. ActKnowledge (2009) highlights that TOC 'shows a *causal pathway* from here to there by specifying what is needed for goals to be achieved', and goes on to highlight the ability of TOC to show 'a clear and testable hypothesis about how change will occur that not only allows you to be accountable for results, but also makes your results more credible because they were *predicted to occur in a certain way*'.

We leave these behind because, these approaches to TOC methodology may reinforce problematic cause and effect thinking that does not take into account the complexity of social change. Change conditions and interventions at lower levels of a TOC do not *cause* higher level conditions to occur, i.e. there is not a linear, cause–effect relationship. One thing can be said to cause another '...if the cause is both necessary and sufficient for its effect. One thing is necessary for another if the other cannot occur unless the first one does. One thing is sufficient for another if the occurrence of the first assures the occurrence of the second' (Ackoff 1999: 10). Lower level preconditions might be necessary 'conditions' that support higher level preconditions, but they are never sufficient for their occurrence because all development conditions are emergent, i.e. they have properties which are more than the sum of their parts and which are the result of multiple factors that complexity renders 'inherently unknowable to the human mind' (Flood 1999: 86; Flood 2001). Land, Hauck and Baser (2009: 2) reinforce this from a CD point of view by explaining that '[e]mergence is an unplanned and uncontrollable process in which properties such as capacity emerge from the complex interactions among all actors in the system and produce characteristics not found in any of the elements of the system'. As such, an organisation's interventions are ultimately only part of a myriad of factors that might contribute to overall change. The relationship between change conditions is, like development in general, non-linear.

Figure 1 Necessary 'conditions' for social change



The linear TOC thinking found in much of the TOC literature does not, we believe, adequately take complexity into account, and might actually perpetuate more instrumental approaches to capacity development that oversimplify how capacity might effectively support social change. However, we believe that a more 'systemic' theories of change approach that takes complexity into account at multiple levels and uses systemic learning approaches to grapple with change, can indeed foster more effective capacity development for purposeful social change.

### 3.2 Initial methodological principles of systemic theories of change

The STOC approach assumes that organisational 'capacity development' is ultimately intended to support broader social change *outside* of the organisation (Ortiz Aragón and Taylor 2009: 16), understood as human 'development' in relation to the natural environment. But this social change is complex, inherently non-linear, and outside the 'control' of any development actor, programme, project or other type of intervention. Notwithstanding, even within

situations of high complexity, organisational capacity can and should purposefully support social change – i.e. there can and ought to be a meaningful relationship between capacity development and social change (Ortiz Aragón, this *IDS Bulletin*). So a key challenge becomes finding ways to develop capacities to purposefully contribute to social change, while respecting its highly complex nature.

Methodologically, in order to balance purposefulness with complexity without falling into linear cause and effect thinking, STOC is a critical, ‘soft systemic’ action-learning-based approach to capacity strengthening (and overall change). ‘Soft systemic’ in that complexity is relationally analysed not to engineer systems to conquer complexity; but rather, to model learning approaches for purposeful action within complexity (Checkland 1993, 2000; Checkland and Poulter 2006). ‘Critical’, in that STOC reflectively examines why people think that certain approaches to capacity strengthening and overall change might make sense, by identifying and debating assumptions on change from multiple levels (e.g. individual, organisational and societal) and perspectives (e.g. organisation, primary stakeholders, partner organisations, etc.). These assumptions on how change occurs and what should or should not be done about it are culturally embedded and therefore inherently present, whether we acknowledge them or not. A STOC approach assumes then, that ‘rationally identified’ assumptions on change are inherently superficial and might well represent elements of culture and power that are adverse to the espoused changes that an organisation seeks to support, or more importantly, to the changes that might be meaningful for primary stakeholders. Therefore, a STOC approach supports multiple cognitive<sup>3</sup> reflective methods, e.g. rational, emotional, physical, etc. – for digging deeper into the ‘assumptions that underlie our assumptions’.

Through a STOC approach, we attempt to clarify how an organisation thinks development (change) happens with regards to the issues that it exists to address, and the conditions that might be needed for change to emerge, given the complexities (e.g. power, culture, systems, other actors, etc.) in the broader environment. With this in mind, we can ask: *What capacities are needed to effectively support positive change within this*

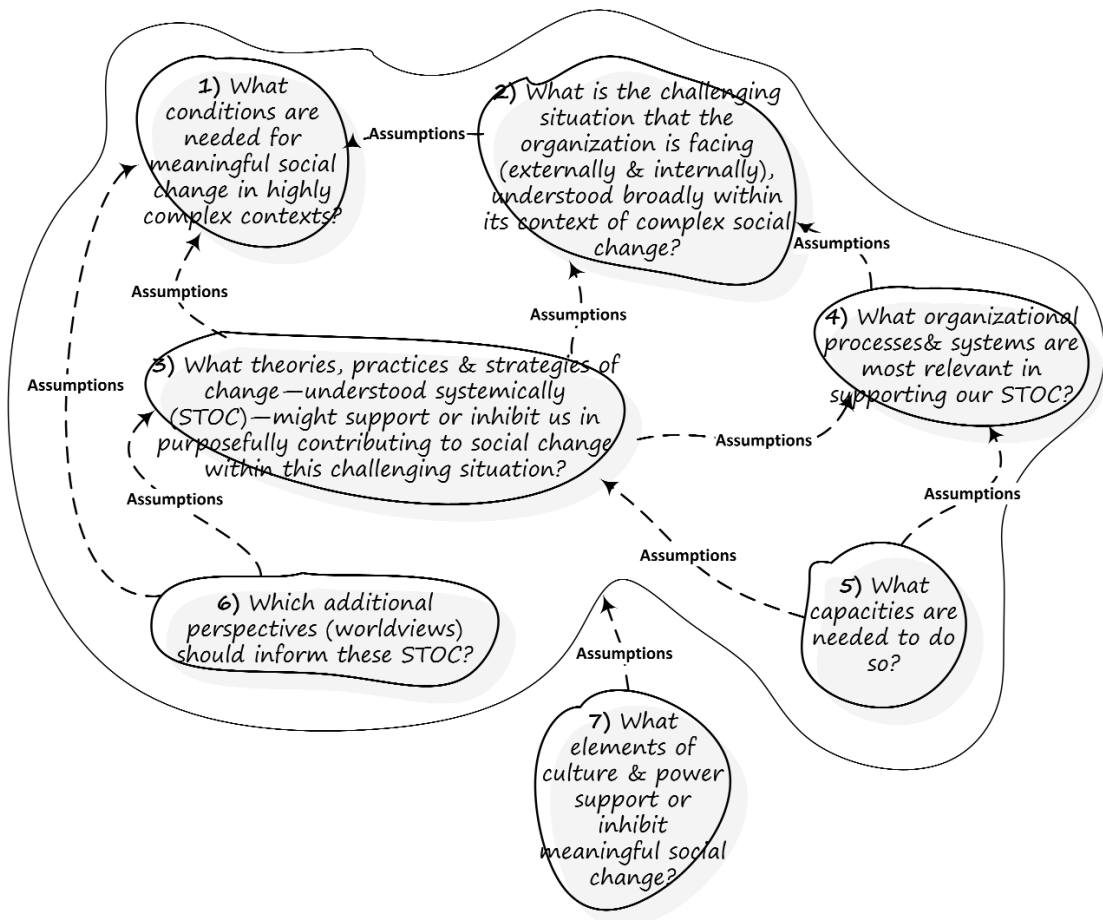
*complexity?* We believe that asking this question, through a STOC lens, might help clarify emergent conditions, systems, relationships and environmental factors related to social change. In the process, it can give ‘...greater attention and recognition to less visible aspects of capacity, such as values, legitimacy, identity and self-confidence, as well as other, non-monetary forms of motivation that may nonetheless be critical to outcomes’ (Land *et al.* 2009: 5).

These concepts can only become operational to the extent that they can be grounded in action. We have seen that, on a more theoretical level, the STOC approach is a way of critically thinking about how we as individuals, organisations, and other social groups and societal configurations, understand how change occurs, and how that understanding strongly influences (but does not determine) how we contribute to change. On a more ‘practical’ level the STOC approach attempts to help SCOs better align their interventions, systems and CD processes (programmatic and overall management) with the complex social change they aim to support. It does so by analysing the actual and desired relationships between the ‘external’ development conditions that are assumed to be needed for positive social change to emerge, and the internal, ‘organisational’ conditions that exist in any particular SCO that wishes to purposefully contribute to that social change. This idea is demonstrated in Figure 1.

The underlying idea of this conceptual model is that there ought to be a systemic relationship between our understanding of the conditions that are needed for social change *to be able to* emerge in a given context, and the ‘internal’, organisational conditions that might best allow us to support that change. On a very broad level, it asks the core question: *What are the conditions that are necessary for social change and what is or ought to be the relationship between those conditions and internal ‘organisational’ conditions, in order to effectively support social change?* It attempts to reduce unhealthy relationships between external and internal conditions for development; perhaps, in some cases, even rendering the internal/external dichotomy too limiting for explaining the relationship of an SCO with its environment.

‘External’ conditions for social change are assumed to be complex, emergent, contextual

Figure 2 STOC methodological moments and questions



and involving multiple actors and factors. These conditions are rendered even more complex because that which might constitute worthwhile change is highly conditioned by what different stakeholders deem to be meaningful, which is, in turn, influenced by differing worldviews on change, and the cultures and identities in which those worldviews are embedded. Multiple complexities render the ‘right paths’ to meaningful social change impossible to predict in advance; social change is not ‘objectively’ definable. Conditions for social change, being complex and contextual, beg contextualised responses that are able to deal with complexity.

‘Internal’ conditions consist of programmatic offerings (e.g. projects, programmes, activities, etc.) based on explicit or implicit, espoused, or actual organisational and individual aspirations and identities, as well as organisational processes

and management systems that respond to deeply held assumptions and worldviews on social change. SCOs have key abilities, or capacities, that allow them to put their programmes, processes and systems to use, all embedded within specific organisational cultures.

Any given SCO, as one of the multiple actors that is involved in change processes, is logically *part of* the ‘external’ social change conditions that it wishes to affect. But its ability to offer meaningful and effective actions in support of that social change is contingent upon its capacity to develop internal conditions that make sense in relation to the complex social change conditions that it wishes to influence. Ongoing critical and strategic reflection is needed in order to attempt to reduce the reproduction of elements of culture and power that are adverse to the changes that are desired in the broader environment, and within the

organisation itself. Additionally, programmatic strategies are needed that respond meaningfully to the worldviews and capacities of key stakeholders.

In Figure 2, we present the same concept but in the form of questions that allow us to see how this relational thinking can be operationalised methodologically. The moments in the diagram are not necessarily chronological; we have included numbers in this diagram only for purposes of demonstrating conceptual flow. For each question there are various methods that can be used, and some methods can be used to answer more than one question. The most important thing to note is that the process tries to make sense out of organisational capacities, internal processes and systems (i.e. 'internal conditions', primarily corresponding to items 4 and 5), *in relation to* the meaningful social change the organisation exists to support (i.e. the 'external conditions' for social change; number 1). It does this by using a dialogical space and emerging methodology called systemic theories of change (STOC, number 3), in which multiple perspectives on change (i.e. worldviews, number 6) are identified and debated through systemic complexity lenses. Elements of culture and power (i.e. number 7) are intended to be analysed throughout.

The central purpose of the process is to contribute to a more synergetic relationship between internal organisational conditions and conditions for social change. The initial or existing relationship between these conditions can be expressed in the contextualised 'challenging situation' (item 2), and at the end of the methodological process the 'new, strengthened' challenging situation can be reanalysed, as part of an ongoing learning process – similar to the cycle Checkland proposes with soft systems methodology (SSM) (Checkland and Poulter 2006). The lingua franca or 'common currency' of the methodology are the conscious or unconscious assumptions, i.e. the beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Schein 2004: 26) that underlie the different affirmations and interpretations that emerge throughout the process, and which are the ultimate source of values and action.

The following additional questions reflect the systemic TOC concepts that have been developed in this section, which might be relevant to organisations that are seeking improved strategic and methodological clarity on

how they might continually and effectively develop the capacities to contribute to emergent, social change in highly complex environments:

- *What are you trying to do?* What is the change vision you are working to support – what changes or shifts in development 'conditions' does your organisation aim to support? What are the most important of these conditions for change and why?
- *What is the complexity of the situation and how might that affect what you propose?* How does what you propose fit in with ongoing development processes? What key actors and factors, spaces, relationships, power and culture characterise the situation? How do broader environmental factors affect the change you aim to support? What conceptual and methodological implications does this have?
- *Why do you think that it is important to support this change?* To whom is it important, i.e. Whose worldviews is it based on? Is this really what the situation calls for, beyond what you wish to do? What is the need/demand? What individual, organisational and societal assumptions about change inform why you think this is important?
- *How do you plan on going about it?* What are the interventions/activities you plan to undertake to support these shifts in conditions? What are your assumptions on how these interventions contribute to these desired conditions? Whose worldviews are to be included in the design of the interventions?
- *Where are you in the picture?* What are your personal motivations and theories of change? How does your own transformation figure in the change? Where are you *in relation to* other actors and conditions?
- *What are the organisational and individual capacities needed to support these theories and practices of change?* What individual and organisational conditions and processes are needed to purposefully respond to what is needed, given the inherent complexities involved in doing so? What do you need to do differently? What are your organisational learning needs?

#### **4 A look at initial systemic relationships between internal and external conditions of INTSOL**

Integración y Solidaridad (INTSOL) is a non-profit social change organisation whose mission is to promote sustainable human development in

Ate Vitarte ('El Ate'), an economically-depressed area on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. INTSOL has been working for more than 15 years to strengthen community and local organisations to value their own processes, and to develop individual and collective capacities to contribute to local development. Most of its activities fall within the area of community-organisation strengthening, where INTSOL primarily 'accompanies' organisations that work with families with children in early learning processes; cultural, educational, recreational and non-formal education organisations; steering committees of neighbourhood groups; and women's groups such as mothers' clubs, popular kitchens, nutrition groups, etc.

We have been carrying out participatory action research with INTSOL for the last six months. The objective of our participatory action research process with INTSOL is to use STOC to carry out a contextualised process of action/reflection that helps identify and organise the elements of a systemic process of social change. We are doing this in order to clarify how INTSOL's action-learning processes can be more effectively oriented towards strengthening INTSOL's internal relationships and INTSOL's interaction with the community.

INTSOL is well-placed to help better understand the relationship between systemic theories of change and purposeful capacity development because it practices a philosophy of personal, organisational and societal transformation, embodied in the practice of Reflect-Action, an approach that seeks 'the empowerment and autonomy of people and organisations, with the objective of achieving personal and social transformations' (Giles Macedo and Abad 2009: 1, our translation). The version of Reflect-Action practised by INTSOL is an offshoot of 'Reflect' which was originally developed by the UK NGO ActionAid as a way to link adult literacy to empowerment by combining Friereian adult literacy approaches with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Archer 2007: 16). INTSOL's practice Reflect-Action promotes the use of multiple ways of approaching theories of change, by employing a focus called *senti-cuerpo-pensante* (emotion-embodiment (touch)-thinking), which uses emotions, sensations and thoughts to better understand identities, motivations and barriers to change at personal, organisational and societal

levels (Giles Macedo and Abad 2009: 1–2). Personal and group knowledge is continually articulated in relation to the contexts, themes and social spaces in which the participants live and act. Reflection is oriented towards capturing personal, social, economic, cultural and political (including power) challenges, both in immediate spaces and broader contexts.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of personal, organisational and societal transformation explicitly values the relationship between internal and external change conditions. In Reflect-Action language, the question: 'What are we learning with regards to the relationship between internal and external conditions' can be posed as: 'What are we learning with regards to the relationship between social, organisational and personal transformation?

#### 4.1 External conditions

Primarily through interviews and participatory workshops, members of INTSOL have been asked broad questions, such as: What is the social change that INTSOL is trying to support? How does that change come about? What is INTSOL's role in contributing to that change? These questions have been asked in order to bring to the surface some of the assumptions they hold about what external change conditions are needed for the social change INTSOL is trying to support (within their complex context). Below is a brief summary of some of INTSOL's thinking on the external conditions needed for social change:<sup>5</sup>

- Social change occurs via sustainable human development within a broader context of organisational and societal change.

This assumption emphasises that the 'subject' of development is the autonomous individual, who is able 'to control his or her own life'. This strengthening and the 'transformation' that comes about, for some, is posed from the perspective of 'a good Christian who desires for people in communities to generate their own capable and sustainable development'. The individual cannot be understood in a vacuum but in relation to the broader context of community organisational and societal change.

- Sustainable human development is achieved via strong community organisations over the long term.



In INTSOL there is a strong belief that community organisations which are strengthened in their overall management (understood broadly) leads to sustainable changes in El Ate. A strengthened organisation has a clear development vision, is highly networked with other actors, is participatory, and incorporates planning into its work.

- Organisations and individuals are strengthened through reflective consciousness, empowerment and critical position-taking in confronting their reality.

This assumption focuses on the belief within INTSOL that as people become more aware of their reality, the need for change becomes internalised, as does one's recognition of his/her capacities and liberty to influence reality. This includes a challenge to passive community leaders 'to take a stand', and make conscious decisions that take into account the broader context. This reflective awareness is relational and 'facilitates the construction of a common vision and objectives' between people who see each other as social beings – not primarily as transactional objects.

- Processes of action/reflection and teaching/learning, as strengthening processes, can generate awareness and empowerment.

Via reflection, INTSOL has become aware of how its own incoherencies and contradictions become more evident when members encounter new or high risk situations. As such, they believe that action/reflection is a fundamental way of empowering people to pursue and support the wellbeing of their organisations and communities. From these reflective capacities 'societal, organisational and personal transformation can emerge', to the extent they generate awareness of power relationships that favour processes of equitable change.

- A central role of INTSOL is to facilitate and accompany processes of community reflection.

One doesn't change people; people change as they decide what they want for themselves. But it is about facilitating and helping them see the inequitable realities, the injustice...;

and then they decide. Accompaniment – as a capacity strengthening strategy of provocation, stimulus, feedback and support – is the main role that INTSOL sees for itself. Effective accompaniment of local community organisations must be 'at their own pace' and in their own concrete situations.

These assumptions regarding the conditions that are needed for social change are just that – approximations, lenses through which to interpret the complex social world, and to initiate a dialogue between that world and the internal conditions of INTSOL. They are based on a systemic analysis carried out through a series of debates, development of relational diagrams, and other reflective exercises. More surfacing and questioning of assumptions is needed, particularly in relation to the elements of power, culture and worldviews underlying these change assumptions. This systemic analysis should not attempt to search for the 'optimal' or 'correct' answer; rather, it should attempt to see enough and understand enough to make sense of our world so we can act meaningfully and purposefully within it (Burns 2007).

The STOC approach supported INTSOL to reflect on the relationship between these assumed external change conditions and its internal systems, processes and capacities. In this process, four particular areas – analysed in relation to the external conditions above – emerged as particularly needing more targeted capacity development. They are (1) organisational identity; (2) accompaniment and learning; (3) systemic awareness and understanding of the broader social change context; and (4) power and relationships.

#### 4.2 Internal conditions

##### *Organisational identity*

An interesting assumption that surfaced was about the concept of personal, organisational and societal transformation. In INTSOL, this concept is intertwined with other organisational principles such as the importance of individual identity, Christian spirituality, sustainable human development, gender equity, etc. However, while personal, organisational and societal transformation offers a comfortable umbrella for many members to stand under, the principles that it contains (e.g. Christian spirituality for some), are not seen as the same

by all. One member offers a challenge to more narrow understandings of this concept:

I see INTSOL in a phase of restructuring its identity and organisational objectives. Thinking of the organisational vision which speaks of a Christian organisation that promotes values of human sustainable development [with]... Christian and democratic values, I think Reflect-Action is more open to include distinct identities and cosmovisions... But I feel a bit of tension between the openness implicit in Reflect-Action and INTSOL's actual vision. (Francisco pers. comm. 2009)

Via systemic analysis of these change assumptions, members of INTSOL were enabled to reflect that conceptual clarity has not been worked on at an organisation level, nor has there been adequate critical reflection on the 'subjective elements' of organisational beliefs. This is particularly important considering that, for some, there is suspicion of confusion between Reflect-Action and organisational purpose – including insinuations that, for some, they are one and the same. This leads to the fear that an exclusionary practice of Reflect-Action could create obstacles in understanding other ways of seeing the world – even if these alternatives made more sense for working with local communities. Additionally, Reflect-Action as an *implicit* focus could operate as an exclusionary practice within the organisation itself. Indeed, knowledge of Reflect-Action has been identified as one of the elements of symbolic power within INTSOL (see Power and relationships, below).

In response to these issues, INTSOL has decided to carry out a process to deepen their own theoretical and epistemological knowledge of Reflect-Action, as well as complementary approaches. This is in addition to a deepening of organisational philosophy, and a more explicit and inclusive construction of organisational identity.

#### ***Accompaniment and learning***

INTSOL currently carries out team- and organisation-level learning sessions (twice monthly) in which programmatic, overall management and organisational capacity and learning themes are discussed. These sessions are meant to help 'learn in action' and generate learning criteria for use when working in

communities or in the office. When analysed in relation to the social change the organisation supports it was noted that more team-level learning had been incorporated as a result of the internal learning sessions. At the same time it was noted that – outside of the formal sessions – much more is shared between individuals than teams, and that sharing and learning between teams was not very active.

Additionally, it was noted that there was little space for thematic reflection that would be relevant to the work of specific teams (as opposed to broader organisational sharing). A conclusion drawn was that a strengthening process was needed that would generate more coordination and sharing of experiences, including the incorporation of a more self-reflective perspective that recognises the existence of real conflicts in the communities as well as within the organisation.

INTSOL also questioned its own varying accompaniment approaches and understandings of what accompaniment means or should mean. As a first step it has been suggested that the different teams within INTSOL incorporate feedback into their existing processes.<sup>6</sup> Feedback between colleagues across teams; between facilitators and community members; between different levels of hierarchy and even between women and men were all identified as an important complement to other evaluation processes. The idea is that feedback can help overcome self-referential behaviour, as one is confronted with the perceptions of others, and can help support more equitable and respectful relationships and power balances.

#### ***Systemic awareness and understanding of the broader social change context***

INTSOL has changed over the last few years from an organisation that was very focused on its own offering (and its own offices, from where it offered most of its training and other services), to an organisation that now primarily works directly in the communities that it supports – many of which are a significant distance from its offices. This physical shift has opened up the possibility of understanding the contexts of social change more deeply. However, there is also the possibility that an organisation can change its place of work without significantly shifting its organisational culture and work habits.

Different members of INTSOL noted that there is currently insufficient reflection and understanding of context in their organisational processes. In fact, as we were trying to compare how INTSOL was performing in this area, none of the participants were able to come up with examples of intentional contextual analyses. It was suggested that processes be incorporated that help INTSOL make more sense of the complex contexts in which it works. Specifically, it was suggested that this analysis could occur each time INTSOL designs, evaluates or systematises activities. Additionally – given that personal, organisational and societal transformation cannot emerge without an active network of allies and collaborators – it was suggested that a more explicit approach for establishing and working through alliances be developed. Lastly, it was suggested that the teams within INTSOL strengthen their capacities to read, act and learn within the complex human contexts in which they work.

#### *Power and relationships*

As mentioned earlier, the Reflect-Action concept of personal, organisational and societal transformation implies organisational reflection and change in support of ‘transformational’ change in local communities. This includes intentionally generating awareness on how power relationships support or hinder this change. The STOC approach shares this focus by examining the role power relationships play in generating internal and external conditions for change, including the relationship between the two.

INTSOL defines power as ‘personal or collective capacities to make decisions or influence change which can generate oppressive relationships (i.e. “negative power”), or can affirm responsible and autonomous relationships (i.e. “constructive power”)’.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the process, the issue of organisational power relations has been very present. At the beginning of the process, the assumption was raised that ‘although there are promising power relationships open to participation within INTSOL, a more critical analysis might permit a restructuring of these relationships towards more democratic and horizontal processes and structures’.<sup>8</sup> More recently, INTSOL carried out a week-long analysis on these issues and identified how particular power relationships – as expressed through communications and interpersonal

relationships, decision-making processes, criticisms and conflicts, specific knowledge capacities, and formal hierarchy, positions and roles – were perceived to affect their capacity to support transformational change. Through these discussions, elements of symbolic capital that confer power upon individuals within the organisation have emerged.<sup>9</sup> These include longevity in INTSOL; the level of visibility of one’s understanding of organisational philosophy; and the closeness of relationship one is perceived to have with the director, among others. Very interestingly, ‘a working’ understanding of Reflect-Action – the very approach that enables critical reflection towards transformational change, and, we believe, allowed for power to be placed on the agenda and to be made more visible, tangible and susceptible to change – was also identified as an important element in power relationships in INTSOL. This is consistent with INTSOL’s definition of power, which highlights its ‘capacity’ for use in negative or constructive manners.

INTSOL is currently in the process of connecting its power analyses to specific processes such as planning, facilitation and monitoring and evaluation. This includes a deeper reflection on how internal power relationships affect the ways INTSOL interacts with the communities it serves.

## **5 Conclusion**

The STOC approach supports the visualisation and exploration of the assumed external and internal conditions of change. This includes the assumptions of the roles and interventions of other actors, and the inherent complexities within. Through this process, organisations are better able to analyse whether their approaches and interventions are systemically well thought out in relation to the positive change that they seek. It may help us to see gaps in our thinking, questionable assumptions, or dominant worldviews that affect how we go about change processes. It might also help, if conditions of power and culture, and organisational systems, processes and structures permit, change worldviews enough to support more thoughtful capacity development intervention.

The STOC process we have initiated with INTSOL attempts to take complexity into account at multiple levels, as well as important societal, organisational and individual worldviews

and influences. These processes lead us to believe that the STOC approach – as a systemic learning process – can support more purposeful capacity development of social change

## Notes

- 1 For an in-depth discussion on how my prior use of theory of change (TOC) methodology spurred further interest in its use for organisational capacity building, see Ortiz Aragón 2009: 12–23.
- 2 We used TOC at an organisational level, i.e. to develop an overall organisational theory of change. The more common use of TOC is for designing specific projects or programmes.
- 3 STOC uses Capra's (1996) broad definition of cognition, understood as 'the process of knowing... which is much broader than that of thinking. It involves perception, emotion and action – the entire process of life. In the human realm cognition also includes language, conceptual thinking, and all the other attributes of human consciousness'.
- 4 This entire paragraph is either reconstructed or directly paraphrased from the document *What is Reflect Action?* (Giles Macedo and Abad 2009: 1,

organisations, while avoiding 'blind prescriptions based on *assumed conditions for change*' (Reeler 2007: 2, italics added).

- 2). That document also draws from the Reflect website, [www.reflect-action.org/en/home.html](http://www.reflect-action.org/en/home.html) (accessed 12 February 2010).
- 5 The assumptions presented in this section are not assertions of the authors; rather, they are examples of the kind of 'data' that can be generated by the methodology.
- 6 INTSOL currently carries out self-assessment processes at the team level, but those self-assessments do not include specific feedback mechanisms.
- 7 This definition was taken from a recent internal workshop on power relations in INTSOL.
- 8 This was taken from a draft case study on the first phase of the research. It was generated by INTSOL in a workshop in July 2009.
- 9 See Ortiz Aragón (this *IDS Bulletin*), for an explanation on how capacities might be thought of as symbolic capital.

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